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TAGS: PREL PGOV PTER IZ JO

SUBJECT: UPDATE ON CURRENT JORDAN-IRAQ RELATIONS

REF: A. AMMAN 3231

1B. AMMAN 6160
1C. AMMAN 5806
1D. AMMAN 5456
1E. AMMAN 5510
1F. AMMAN 3963
1G. AMMAN 6568
1H. AMMAN 6240
1I. AMMAN 6118
1J. AMMAN 6538

Classified By: CDA David Hale for reasons 1.4 (b), (d)

SUMMARY

11. (C) Official Jordanian-Iraqi relations remain strong despite GOJ fears that insurgent violence may cross the border, and tensions related to Ahmad Chalabi. The GOJ has worked hard to smooth over the King's December public warnings of a "Shia Crescent", as well as the diplomatic row sparked by reports that a Jordanian was the March 1 Hillah suicide bomber. The GOJ provides important support for the U.S. effort in Iraq. Jordan plans to send its designated Ambassador to Baghdad as soon as security arrangements permit. Senior Iraqi clerics and politicians attended July's international Islamic conference in Amman. The GOJ continues to engage Ayatollah Sistani and Sunni tribal leaders. END SUMMARY.

ENGAGING A NEW NEIGHBOR

12. (C) The relationship with Iraq has always been one of Jordan's most important. The GOJ views it as a priority to establish strong relations with the emerging new Iraq. GOJ support for operation Iraqi Freedom was outstanding, and Amman had a close relationship with Iyad Allawi. However, tensions spiked in December 2004 after King Abdullah, reflecting widespread Sunni apprehensions over the impending Iraqi elections, warned of an emerging "Shia crescent" during a Western television interview. Hard feelings in Iraq toward Jordan were again inflamed by press reports in March 2005 that a Jordanian family had celebrated the "martyrdom" of their son, Raed al-Banna, who allegedly carried out a suicide bombing in Hillah. Crowds attempted to sack the Jordanian mission in Baghdad, and both governments recalled their ranking diplomats. A sudden spotlight on Jordanian media articles supportive of the so-called "noble Iraqi resistance" compounded the row. King Abdullah, who was on an official visit to the U.S. at the time, ordered the Jordanian Charge back to Baghdad. The King's unhappiness with the mishandling of this incident contributed to the dismissal of PM Faysal al Fayed and FM Hani Al Mulki shortly thereafter. The GOJ launched a media campaign highlighting Jordan's efforts to train Iraqi security forces and secure the Jordan-Iraq border. At the same time the King called on Jordanian media to end its use of positive terms in describing insurgent attacks and to report responsibly on Iraqi issues. His meeting with a delegation of visiting Iraqi journalists in April produced some positive coverage in Iraq (ref A).

A CONSISTENT MESSAGE

13. (C) The King and senior GOJ officials now stress support for the Iraqi Transitional Government (ITG) and the ongoing political process there. The GOJ continues to host senior ITG figures for meetings in Amman, as well as the Jordan International Police Training Center, instruction for Iraqi soldiers and pilots at Jordanian military facilities, and training provided to many Iraqi civilian government employees. The GOJ has designated an Ambassador for its mission in Iraq (retired General Ahmad Salameh al-Lozi) and on August 15, the cabinet agreed to send him to Baghdad as soon as arrangements for his security are completed. (NOTE: FM Kasrawi told Charge that he would like to send one or two

other Jordanian diplomats to Baghdad, but needed assurances on their safety as well. END NOTE.) The GOJ would prefer for al-Lozi to be in Baghdad prior to the start of the UN General Assembly in September, but he may have to present his credentials and return to Amman if sufficient security measures are not in place by then (ref B-C).

¶14. (C) In another potential boost to Jordan-Iraq relations, the GOJ is still hoping to make good on Prime Minister Badran's stated intention to travel to Baghdad (ref E). The daily newspaper Al Ghad reported on August 16 that "Badran plans to visit Baghdad soon to hold bilateral discussions with Iraqi officials" (ref B).

ENDING SECTARIAN VIOLENCE

¶15. (C) On July 4-5, in an effort to unite senior Islamic religious leaders, including Shi'a and Sunnis from Iraq, against terrorism and religious extremism, the King sponsored (through the al-Bayt Foundation) an international Islamic conference in Amman. Conference participants issued a final statement that forbids Muslims from declaring as apostates followers of any of the eight schools of Islamic jurisprudence. Additionally, the agreed statement limited the issuance of religious edicts (or fatwas) to qualified Muslim scholars of the eight schools (ref D). Through this conference, King Abdullah hoped to contain Sunni/Shi'a violence in Iraq by depriving terrorists of religious cover through the issuance of their own fatwas. Furthermore, it was another chance for the GOJ to extend an olive branch to the Iraqi Shi'a. The King intends to capitalize on the momentum of the Islamic conference -- including a fatwa by Ayatollah Sistani supportive of the final statement -- by inviting Islamic leaders one tier down to follow-up meetings that would, among other things, declare as forbidden the use of violence against other Muslims. This plan complements GOJ engagement with Iraqi Sunni tribal leaders, as well as communications with Sistani, on a possible conference in Jordan of Iraqi leaders, secular and religious, with the objective of combating sectarian violence (ref E).

GROWING ECONOMIC TIES

¶16. (C) The Jordanian and Iraqi economic relationship, which was vital to Jordan under Saddam, is reviving. To facilitate expanding bilateral trade, King Abdullah is pushing for a joint border facility at the Karama-Trebil crossing. This proposal (which the King highlighted during a May visit to the border) includes technical assistance and capacity building for Iraqis, a shared software system allowing for more rapid information exchange, and improved infrastructure and equipment upgrades. Once this project receives funding and if it proves successful, it could serve as a model for other border crossings.

¶17. (U) An estimated 400,000 Iraqis are now living in Jordan. The rich among them have driven the real estate market in fashionable West Amman through the roof. Iraqi capital is an important component of the recent strong performance of the Amman bourse and of the Jordanian economy as a whole (ref F).

OUTSTANDING ISSUES: Security, Chalabi, the Insurgency

¶18. (C) Fears that violence will spread into Jordan are on everyone's mind here. Many fret that continuing attacks on Shi'a civilians will lead to Shi'a militias being unleashed against Iraq's Sunnis in a Balkan-style ethnic war, prompting large refugee flows into Jordan. (Ironically, it is this fear that leads the more thoughtful critics of U.S. policy here to condemn the U.S. intervention in Iraq while at the same time warning against a premature exit.) The Jordanian security services are also concerned that the GOJ's support for the U.S. effort in Iraq will prompt insurgents to strike here (ref G).

¶19. (S/NF) There are periodically rumors in Iraq that members of Saddam's family living in Jordan, as well as alleged former regime officials in exile here, are actively aiding insurgent forces in Iraq through financial contributions and/or operational planning. However, the Jordanian General Intelligence Directorate (GID) keeps Saddam's relatives here under close watch, and shares details on this coverage through intel channels. The GOJ remains ready to expel or take any other requested action against Iraqis accused of wrongdoing (ref H).

¶110. (C) The struggle between Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Ahmad Chalabi and the GOJ over his conviction in absentia on bank fraud continues, with Chalabi upping the ante by filing a related lawsuit in the U.S. against the GOJ (ref I-J).

Chalabi is insisting on reversal of the Jordanian verdict and a statement of his innocence; some in the GOJ claim Chalabi is seeking to undermine Jordanian-Iraqi relations to ratchet up the pressure. (A few GOJ contacts claimed Chalabi paid to bus in the demonstrators who attacked the Jordanian mission in Baghdad in April, though they never produced any proof for this accusation.) A committee at the Royal Court is working to resolve Chalabi's dispute with Jordan, but their work has been complicated by Chalabi's legal action in the U.S.

¶11. (C) Conclusion: The GOJ cast its lot with the U.S. effort in Iraq, and recognizes that Jordan could not afford a coalition failure there. Iraq will remain one of Jordan's most important relationships in the region. The GOJ, and increasingly other levels of Jordanian society, have realized that Jordan cannot afford to be on poor terms with whatever new order emerges to the east.

HALE